

'A narrower Channel' from the Corriere della Sera (29 October 1971)

Caption: On 29 October 1971, the Italian daily newspaper Corriere della Sera welcomes the House of Commons decision to approve, in principle, the accession of the United Kingdom to the European Communities.

Source: Corriere della Sera. dir. de publ. Spadolini, Giovanni. 29.10.1971, n° 255; anno 96. Milano: Corriere della Sera. "La manica più stretta", p. 1.

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A narrower Channel

The vote in the Commons has surpassed all predictions. A majority of 112 votes in favour of Britain's entry into the European Common Market is the best reward for the perseverance of Edward Heath and the Conservatives in championing the cause of integration with the Continent in the face of all the difficulties and resistance that at one time had given grounds for pessimism and a lack of confidence on both sides of the Channel.

There was no ultimatum and no intimidation. The dissident and Europeanist wing of the Labour Party, the wing that had not wished to share in the sensational volte-face performed by Harold Wilson and to deny the traditional professions of party loyalty, defied the Party whip, did not submit to party discipline and joined with the Conservatives to say 'yes' to a united Europe, which was then sealed with the surprise result of the vote in the Lords and the Commons, opening up an important new page in British and European history.

Mr Heath had played with high stakes. By granting a free vote to his Parliamentary group, which harbours a tenaciously and unshakeably anti-European faction that hankers after the imperial conditions of a lost world, he had practically eliminated the already meagre and fragile majority underpinning his beleaguered government. However, the risks in the Conservative camp were largely counterbalanced by the advantages on the Opposition front. Conservative desertions, which turned out to be fewer in number and of lesser significance, would have been offset by the support of the unorthodox Labour MPs who made up Roy Jenkins' group. Not only that, but in the face of a perplexed and troubled public opinion, which largely represents British views on the subject of Europe (it is sufficient to read the letters from the public in *The Times*), the Conservative Government had dispelled the impression of any sort of guillotine or any manipulation of rules or procedures.

Britain's entry into the Common Market, after so many years of to-ing and fro-ing, after all the delays caused by the disdainful and proud wishes of General de Gaulle, after the misunderstandings and hesitations of the successive governments that have run post-Churchillian Britain, was an event too decisive or — to use a much overused term — too 'historic' to justify the wishes of Parliament, the supreme source of sovereignty and legitimacy in Great Britain, not being expressed in complete freedom without let or hindrance of any kind.

What was the objective achieved by the Heath Government with tonight's vote, a vote that supports the efforts of all the Europeanists, at a sad, grey time for Europe, which has a history that too often transcends it? The positive epilogue of 28 October had been preceded by a full and exhaustive debate, the longest in the parliamentary history of post-war Britain; it reflected every position across the British political spectrum: enthusiastic and wholehearted support, the perplexed and lazy 'yes' votes, considerations of contingent opportunity, the concerns of those economic sectors that will inevitably be damaged by integration with the Continent, the fierce, unshakeable opposition associated with the far right — the last vestige of imperial isolationism — and with a large proportion of the left, even among non-extremists — as an example of the corporative privileges of a working class that is always insensible to voices from the Continent.

In the background there is the drama of the Labour Party: the major and significant contrast between the 'political' concept of the *Labour Party* and that of the trade unions. The former is prepared to tolerate the 'disobedience' of the Jenkins wing, merely imposing formal and nominal sanctions; the latter are resolved to deploy all the available weapons of reprisal and revenge — including the threat of non re-election in marginal constituencies — against the Labour MPs who are evading party discipline and, in supporting the idea of Europe, are the saviours of that same Heath Government. Wilson is in the position of a 'mediator', no longer influential as he once was, a position that has been called a tightrope, steadfast in his 'no' to Europe on the conditions obtained by Heath, but determined to avoid total dominance by the trade union wing, the same wing that is allegedly bound to remove him from his controversial and no longer undisputed leadership. Other factors are the plebiscite votes against the united Europe, both in the trades union congress and, albeit to a lesser degree, in the party conference, votes that would have crushed (but Britain is not Britain for nothing) any Parliament on the Continent, where the machinery of party power would have dispelled any conscientious objection and overwhelmed any ideological loyalty or coherence.

All in all, a great day for Europe; a rekindled hope above all for the younger generations. It is not the finishing line, yet. Mr Wilson, tolerant in the face of parliamentary opposition, will be extremely tough in the fight over the procedures for the application of the Rome Treaties, breathing down Heath's neck along the way, seizing every opportunity to bring down the uncertain Conservative Government and to put the anti- or non-European choice to his party again, right from the start. All the continental 'partners' need to take into account the peculiar features of the British situation and to avoid any wrong move that might revive resistance or exacerbate the intransigence that has been anything but curbed (most of the country is still opposed to Europe, despite the improvements observed in the most recent public opinion polls). We therefore call on all the members of the Common Market to adopt a policy of stringency and responsibility, in particular in economic affairs. Britain is the country that has taught the Continent about the policy of 'austerity'. Will there be someone capable of referring to this model in the face of 'Peronist' suggestions, which continue to ferment in Italy? We must hope that for us, too, there will be a 'narrower Channel'.